

# Information Brief

## *Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in North and Central Asia: Recent Developments and Outlooks*

Well-functioning civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) systems are essential to evidenced-based policy planning for inclusive and sustainable development. This information brief provides an overview of the national CRVS systems in North and Central Asia (NCA), highlights the challenges faced by the subregion's countries in terms of implementing international guidelines and recommends policy actions<sup>1</sup>.

### Introduction to CRVS

Civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) is the continuous, permanent, compulsory and universal recording of the occurrence and characteristics of vital events of the population in accordance with the law. The actors in a CRVS system typically include the civil registration authorities, Ministry of Interior or Home Affairs, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Health, National Statistics Office and development partners.

CRVS is about a person's legal identity and a right to recognition as a person before the law and their formal relationship with the State. It provides individuals with documentary evidence, for example a birth certificate, to prove their name, age, family relationships and the nationality of their parents, which can be important for accessing essential services such as healthcare, education and social protection. This also has implications for other ensuing rights and empowering activities such as political participation, recourse to justice, nationality, property ownership, formal employment, using banking and financial services and inheritance.

Recording every life event is also an opportunity to produce the most accurate, complete and timely statistics on the health and demographics of the population, and to maintain a national civil registry or a population database. While producing vital statistics through sample surveys serves a valuable function of highlighting and drawing attention to the possible scale of the situation, these can be costly, uncertain and may not cover the most vulnerable segments of the population, nor can they be localized. They are not a long-term substitute for vital statistics derived from a universal CRVS system.

Knowing how many people live in the country and its subdivisions, the leading causes of death, the fertility rates and life expectancy, enhances public administration and provides decision-makers with information to better respond to the needs of society through more effective, efficient and directed policies at national and local levels. This data allows the government to identify public health policy priorities and to implement Universal Health Coverage.<sup>2</sup>

Global and regional institutions have long recognized the importance of well-functioning and comprehensive CRVS systems for development. The newly adopted Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) include a specific target on CRVS (Target 16.9: By 2030, provide legal identity for all, including birth registration). Moreover, many of the SDGs' 17 goals and 169 targets require strategic implementation and close monitoring through vital statistics indicators. Therefore, well-designed and well-maintained national CRVS systems are essential to achieving national SDG targets.

In the Asia Pacific region, the Ministerial Conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics held in 2014 established a Regional Action Framework on CRVS including 3 concrete goals, 15 targets, action areas and key principles to facilitate improvements in CRVS in the region by 2024.<sup>2</sup> In addition, countries of the region signed up to a set of implementation steps, including reporting CRVS system progress to ESCAP.

### CRVS in North and Central Asia

Countries in the NCA subregion have relatively good coverage of basic vital statistics supported primarily through well-functioning civil registration systems. As shown in Table 1, the vast majority of NCA countries report that over 90% of all births and deaths are recorded in the national civil registration systems with secondary sources largely confirming the self-reported figures.

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**Table 1: Coverage of civil registration systems in NCA**

Country	Vital Event	Primary source		Secondary source	
		Coverage	Year	Coverage	Year
Armenia	Births <sup>†</sup>	>90%	2010	100%	2010
	Deaths	100%	1994 <sup>‡</sup>	76%	2011
Azerbaijan	Births <sup>†</sup>	99%	1994 <sup>‡</sup>	94%	2006
	Deaths	>90%	2001	93%	2012
Georgia	Births <sup>†</sup>	>90%	2001	99%	2011
	Deaths	>90%	2000	87%	2009
Kazakhstan	Births <sup>†</sup>	>90%	2000	100%	2010
	Deaths	>90%	2001	92%	2009
Kyrgyzstan	Births <sup>†</sup>	>90%	2014	96%	2005
	Deaths	>90%	2014	98%	2009
Russian Federation	Births <sup>†</sup>	>90%	2013	n/a	n/a
	Deaths	>90%	2013	99%	2012
Tajikistan	Births <sup>†</sup>	>90%	2011	88%	2012
	Deaths	75-89%	2011	<50%	1999
Turkmenistan	Births <sup>†</sup>	>90%	1998	96%	2006
	Deaths	>90%	1998	76%	1998
Uzbekistan	Births <sup>†</sup>	>90%	2001	100%	2006
	Deaths	>90%	2001	82%	2000

**Notes**

\* Primary source: UNSD Vital Statistics Questionnaire

\*\* Secondary source: compiled by UNICEF and WHO

<sup>†</sup> Live births

<sup>‡</sup> International Institute for Vital Registration and Statistics

**Source**

United Nations Statistics Division (last updated: December 2014)

[http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/CRVS/CR\\_coverage.htm](http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/CRVS/CR_coverage.htm)

Among the NCA countries, the levels of modernization of civil registration systems are not equal and vital statistics produced varies in terms of comprehensiveness and quality. Some countries have implemented electronic databases and filing systems while others have just begun to explore such initiatives. A number of countries are nearly in full compliance with international reporting standards while some have substantial room for improvements.

Irrespective of the differences, virtually all countries are implementing efforts in term of modernizing civil registration systems and enhancing vital statistics. These efforts include: establishing national legislative frameworks for CRVS, raising public awareness and building capacity.

**CRVS in NCA: good practices**

**Kazakhstan**

Birth, death and perinatal death data are entered into a unified system that allows the Ministry of Justice, Ministry of

Health and State Statistics Committee to manage a common, real-time population registry and produce vital statistics, including daily reports of pregnancies and maternal deaths.

**Uzbekistan**

The government made the registration of marriages mandatory in 2009 to protect the rights of women and children, and to serve as a means to prevent underage marriages.

**Challenges for NCA countries**

While North and Central Asian countries are noteworthy for the progress achieved in improving national CRVS systems, they still face notable challenges, such as registration of cause of death, inter-agency coordination, and coverage of migrant workers. A review of specific guidelines based on the United Nation's "Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System"<sup>1</sup> and the Asia Pacific Regional Action Framework<sup>2</sup> is undertaken, as such information can help address these challenges.

**Cause of death and infant death registration**

As part of mortality statistics, data on the causes of death can reveal significant health risks affecting the population and are essential for formulating efficient and effective public health policy. Nearly all national civil registration systems in NCA countries mandate reporting of the cause of death. However, the quality of the data, measured by the level of detail, accuracy, completeness and timeliness, is a significant issue. As noted by national civil registrars, the lack of trained medical professionals, unclear procedures and difficulties reaching rural populations contribute to the low quality<sup>3</sup>.

**Table 2: Cause of death vital statistical performance index by country**

Country	Index	Year
Armenia	53.1	2012
Azerbaijan	29.3	2007
Georgia	51.4	2010
Kazakhstan	44.4	2010
Kyrgyzstan	86.3	2010
Tajikistan	30	2005
Turkmenistan	7.6	2006
Uzbekistan	53	2005
Russian Federation	71.6	2012

**Source**

Philips et al. "A composite metric for assessing data on mortality and causes of death: the vital statistics performance index"

<http://www.pophealthmetrics.com/content/12/1/14>

Another critical area for improvement is foetal and infant death and cause of death registration. A significant portion of NCA countries report low or even no registration for foetal

and infant deaths citing reasons such as lack of legal requirements and social stigma associated to infant death.

There are a number of ways for countries to counter these issues through enhancing the cause of death registration process:

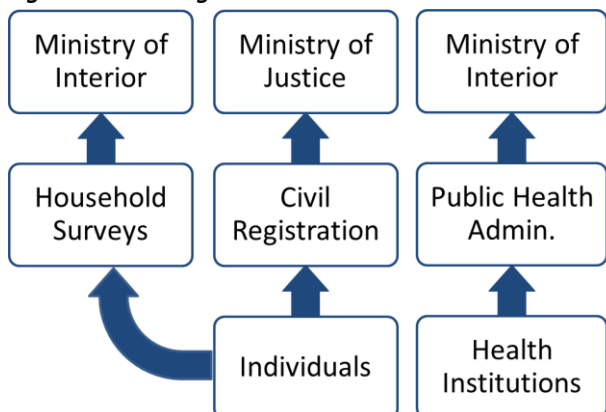
- (a) Improve coordination with health institutions, both public and private, to ensure and monitor cause of death registration;
- (b) Provide sufficient and continuous training for medical professionals to ensure they can comply with national standards;
- (c) Adopting the World Health Organization’s International Classification of Diseases (ICD) coding for cause of death reporting. This also opens the opportunity to utilize substantial resources of the WHO to train medical personnel;
- (d) Provide alternatives such as verbal autopsy for rural and hard-to-reach populations;
- (e) Reduce the associated stigma through raising public awareness.

### **Inter-agency coordination**

Since there are many institutions involved in and benefiting from CRVS, effective coordination is a prerequisite for universal and responsive CRVS systems. Within countries, effective coordination among different local, provincial and national stakeholders involved in reporting, recording and registering the occurrence of vital events is essential, particularly for preventing duplication of functions and information and for facilitating the effective use of registration records for statistical purposes.

National stakeholders have noted the lack of coordination between relevant agencies as one of the most significant and detrimental challenges, resulting in a “chaotic exchange of information”, unnecessary redundancies and operational inefficiencies<sup>3</sup>.

**Figure 1: CRVS organization structure: decentralized**



Source: ESCAP

For NCA countries, the overarching challenge to national vital statistics coordination may be structural or institutional. In the subregion, government statistics including vital statistics are somewhat decentralized with various ministries and agencies reporting in separate, parallel flows with few lateral linkages (as shown in Figure 3). The lack of coordination can be attributed to many factors including the absence of national coordination mechanisms, competition among agencies over limited resources and incompatibility of standards and databases.

To improve coordination among all relevant government agencies, NCA countries need to establish effective and sustainable national CRVS coordination mechanisms. Considering the different structure of government organization and varying levels of inter-agency coordination, each country can first assess the current state of national CRVS coordination and identify significant barriers to coordination through a national committee comprising all relevant stakeholders. The assessment serves as a basis to formulate a national coordination mechanism that includes:

- (a) Standardized definitions, classifications and operational procedures across all agencies to ensure compatibility;
- (b) Inter-linkages to efficiently fill gaps in vital statistics and reduce redundant reporting;
- (c) Clearly defined roles and responsibilities for all relevant agencies and stakeholders;
- (d) Controls to enhance the quality of data, timeliness and protection of confidentiality;
- (e) Sufficient mandates to ensure sustained cooperation;

In practice, support from the highest-level of government is essential to planning, implementing and monitoring effective national coordination mechanisms.

### **Migrant workers**

In the NCA subregion, achieving comprehensive CRVS coverage necessitates special considerations for migrant workers. The precise number of migrant workers from NCA countries is difficult to measure and varies substantially depending on the source. As such, total remittance as a percentage to the total national GDP is often used as a proxy for the number of migrant workers. The most recent World Bank data show that several NCA countries including Armenia (10%), Georgia (20%), Kyrgyzstan (30%) and Tajikistan (40%) have a significant portion of national GDP coming from personal remittances<sup>4</sup> and most likely, correspondingly large migrant worker populations.

With many economic and political ramifications, labor migration has been recognized as a significant policy issue for the North and Central Asia subregion. Nonetheless, data including vital statistics on migrant workers has remained relatively underdeveloped. Moreover, the increased share of female workers highlights the need to enhance the coverage of national CRVS to migrant workers and their children.

Without proper access to civil registration, migrant workers and their families often lack the legal documentation necessary to exercise property rights and access to basic services, including medical care, housing and education. This creates a major obstacle to reintegration of migrant workers who often have acquired valuable experience and skills abroad.

Ensuring the access to civil registration requires not only national coordination but also regional cooperation, especially between countries of origin and of destination. Specifically:

- (a) At the national level, the legal framework and cooperation mechanism for CRVS should extend to agencies related to migration including the ministry of foreign affairs. Alternative registration methods such as delayed and online registrations can also significantly ease the burden of civil registration on migrant workers and their families.
- (b) At the subregional and regional levels, bilateral and multilateral discussions should focus on legal and practical considerations such as providing birth certificates to child born abroad.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2014). *Principles and Recommendations for a Vital Statistics System, Revision 3*. New York. <http://www.getinthepicture.org/>

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (2014). Brochure: *Civil Registration and Vital Statistics in Asia and the Pacific*. Bangkok <http://www.getinthepicture.org/docs/brochure-crvs.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Based on presentations and documents from the Sub-regional Asian workshop on applying principles and recommendations for implementing the Regional Action Framework for strengthening CRVS. Istanbul, Turkey. 15-18 September 2015.

<sup>4</sup> World Bank Indicators Database <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS>